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ABSTRACT

Schools, families, communities, and students must come together and share in the responsibilities of implementing effective policies and programs that address the unique needs of rural youth. A recent survey of 152 rural school principals in a northwestern state examined how they defined at-risk and how they, in turn, identified at-risk students and implemented practices and policies to address the needs of these students. The most critical finding concerns the incongruence in how rural school principals defined and identified at-risk versus the programs in place to address the needs of rural at-risk students. The majority of rural school principals believed that family and environmental factors were more important at-risk identifiers than academic problems, yet most intervention programs focused on academic remediation and drug and alcohol education. In addition, rural school principals felt that changes were needed in such intangibles as attributes of teachers, traditional structure of schools, and school culture, but did not suggest how these changes could be effected. Data from the study support past research findings on the importance of expanding the school's involvement in the community and involving the "village to raise the child." Results indicate a need for school counselors to be aware of rural school principals' perceptions and concerns so that they can influence change. Contains 51 references. (TD)

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Running head: DEFINING RURAL AT-RISK

Where Defining Rural At-Risk and Intervention/Prevention Converge

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Abstract

Schools, families, communities and students must come together and share in the responsibilities of implementing effective policies and programs which address the unique needs of rural youth. Findings from a recent inquiry of rural school principals about their perceptions of at-risk identifiers, definitions, along with the current programs in place to address their students needs is presented. Findings indicated that the majority of rural school principals recognize the unique needs of students and families who are at-risk yet their perceptions of effective practice lacks congruence with their definition and identification of at-risk youth. Data from the study support past research which suggested that the majority of current practice in rural schools to address the needs of at-risk youth fail to attend to psycho-social and emotional needs and focus primarily on academic remediation programming.

At-risk: *disengaged or alienated from school, family, and or community; likely to fail at school or fail at life (Frymier & Gansneder, 1989).*

Concern about our children dropping out of school has been a relatively new enigma. It was not until the late 40s and early 50s that dropping out of school was perceived as a problem (Schorr, 1989). Moreover during the 50s decade, society began sending out a message that a high school dipoloma was a route out of poverty toward the "good life." According to Schorr (p.18):

> ...most poor and otherwise disadvantaged families lived in an environment that proved day-to-day evidence that hard work, ambition, and perseverance brought rewards--reflecting in large part the expanding demands for unskilled labor.

If the underlying concern facing society is how to prepare children for productive adult lives, the economic picture has a great deal to do with the issue of at-risk. Indeed, changes in the labor market demand and in the nature of the economy have rerouted or shut off the passages up and out of poverty for many lower socio-economic families (National Research Council, 1993). Simiarily, dropping out of school has taken on significant long-term disadvantages. For example, dropouts are reported to be seven and a half times as likely as high school graduates to be dependent on welfare, twice as likely to be unemployed, and twice as likely to live in poverty. Each year the economic disparity between the dropout and the high school graduate has continued to increase. (Children's Defense Fund, 1991; Schorr, 1989; National Research Council)

Above all, the past two decades have demonstrated many significant and noticeable changes in the contexts and settings of adolescent life. The effects documented in numerous

reports, such as the National Center of Education Statistics' (1991b) Dropout Rate in the United States: 1990, that approximately 3.8 million, or 12.1%, of 16 to 24 year-olds have not completed and were not currently enrolled in high school in 1990. In a society that is becoming increasingly technical in its demand upon the labor force, these youth who have left school before graduation have consigned themselves to the ranks of the lower socio-economic status of the unskilled, underemployed, and undereducated adults of the future.

The primary cost, however, has been the high toll paid by dropouts and their families. Research in demographic trends has reported increasing populations of poor, minority, single-parent families (National Research Council, 1993). Aside from the obvious loss of earning potential, the destructive effects of at-risk settings have profound influence on adolescent behavior and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Canalas & Bush, 1992). Over the past two decades, the major settings of adolescent life have become increasingly beleaguered: the number of families living in poverty has expanded, schools are without adequate resources, playgrounds and classrooms are threatened with violence daily. To the extent that the society, instead of being benign and supportive, has become more dangerous and destructive, the lives of America's youth are placed at-risk. (Children's Defense Fund, 1991; National Center for Educational Statistics, 1991a).

Today there exists a unique set of circumstances where lower dropout rates than any time in the history of the United States have inspired more concern about youth at-risk than ever before (Pauli, 1987). Assuming that school completion and school successes are desired goals in American education, there are some compelling arguments which suggest that many students in

our schools may be at-risk, especially those in rural communities with restricted economic development, limited resources, and unique cultural influnces impact their lives.

Rural Schools

Two-thirds of all schools in the United States are in rural areas. The majority of under served and unserved children are located in rural America (Helge, 1989). Distances, scattered populations, and inadequate or unavailable services are obstacles to program development, particularly when specialized facilities and personnel are required (National Research Council, 1993). The isolation of many rural areas, especially those in remote locations with sparse populations, exacerbate many conditions which place youth at-risk.

Research in rural education has begun to recognize the prevalence of at-risk students in astonishing numbers. For example, the Department of Education in the rural state of Wyoming reports that as many as half of the state's children could be classified as at-risk in terms of their potential for dropping out of school, suicide, drug addiction, abuse, crime, pregnancy, or illiteracy (Wyoming Department of Education, 1987). Compounding the issue further: many problems, such as definition, identifying the causes and the resulting consequences, calculating and determining the population are encountered in attempting to understand the concepts and issues surrounding at-risk (Capuzzi & Gross, 1989; DeYoung, 1989; National Center for Education Statistics, 1991b).

Rural Demographics Impacting Youth

Poverty. There are may ways that, as a result of environmental conditions, rural children have been placed at-risk. Rural areas typically have disproportionate percentages of students from poor families affecting all ethnic groups. Whereas 1 in 4 American children under the age

of 6 years lives below the poverty line, in rural areas, 30% of the agricultural population and 24% of the non-agricultural population are living in poverty (Helge, 1989). It has been reported that those who live in rural areas are twice as likely as non-rural to be poor (Brown, 1989).

Services. With very narrow tax bases, rural communities have become dependent on state aid for support services (Lomotey & Swanson, 1989). Fewer community support services are available for at-risk youth in rural areas. Adequate health care and supportive services are often stretched to capacity or unavailable in many rural areas. Rural communities typically lack family planning and community mental health services. A majority of rural schools cannot afford to employ school counselors (Helge, 1985, 1989).

Culture. Rural areas are ethnically homogeneous (Lomotey & Swanson, 1989). Families in small communities essentially "live with" their neighbors. They frequently see each other in the grocery store, post office, and church. If the community has inadequate preventive services (those that inform the community of what to watch for and how to successfully and anonymously intervene), may community members may decline to get involved with families who neglect or abuse their children (Helge, 1989).

Risk-taking behaviors. Many factors contributing to at-risk youth are more prevalent in rural areas. For example, the chances of youth death are much higher in parts of the rural West (Capuzzi, 1994). Reasons include isolation, high unemployment, absence of extended family, and easy access to firearms. Frank Pauper of Rutgers University (cited in Helge, 1989) stated that the Western macho culture is so prevalent in rural youth that risk-taking, drinking and fighting are the norm. Added to this is the limited entertainment facilities; thus, alternatives such

as underage drinking, illegal drug use, and experimenting with sex becomes exciting and regular alternatives (Helge).

The majority of published research regarding at-risk has established a conceptual or theoretical base from data gathered in urban schools with large minority populations and inner-city problems (Hass, 1990; Kronic & Hargis, 1990). According to Lomotey and Swanson (1989), viewing rural at-risk youth the same as their urban counterparts is not effective practice. The at-risk programs in place in rural schools and communities must be guided by models that are more responsive to the profile of the individual at-risk youth than to perceptions based upon generalized stereotypes.

Defining At-risk from Previous Literature

During the 1960s, the focus of at-risk research was on the pathology of the individual student. James Conant (cited in Cervantes, 1965) stated that the existence in our urban cities of thousands of youth who were both "out of school and out of work is an explosive situation--it is social dynamite: (p. 191). His remarks became widely quoted and tended to identify in the public mind the typology of the at-risk student as one who becomes a dropout and soon turns to delinquency and crime. Kowalski and Cangemi (1974) compared the problem of at-risk students as "cancerous" (p. 74) in their meta-analysis of a decade of at-risk literature. In their study, the authors described the typical at-risk youth in the 60s self-centered, few coping skills, lacks ability to delay gratification, "loose and unstructured" value system with "thought processes [that] are likely to be stereotyped and commonplace rather than reflecting originality and creativity" (p. 71).

Early studies (see Cervantes, 1965; Tannenbaum, 1966) indicated a lack of sensitivity to the effect of schools and environment on at-risk students. These studies, conducted with urban youth, were instrumental in the emergence of a profile of at-risk youth which attributed personal characteristics of the individual as the overwhelming determinant of school success or failure.. According to Tannebaum (1966), potential dropouts view themselves as victims. A sizable number of the at-risk population appeared to be in far more serious trouble than just an early termination of their education. Cervantes (1967) concluded that independence, antagonism, and rebellion are more characteristic of the "low class" youth (p. 145) who have dropped out of school and that do not choose to be part of the norm. Lower-class youth who were going along with the system exhibited more youth-parent mutuality, concurrence and harmony than those who were dropouts. Determining that at-youth were mentally dysfunctional, Cervantes proposed a list of characteristics commonly found among youth who were at-risk of dropping out of school. These predictors were listed under categoric headings and could be used for identifying the potential dropout. Confirming these negative attribute models, Kowalski and Cangemi (1974) reported findings that eight out of nine dropouts come from the lowest social economic class, the majority were found to have little interest in school, and as many as half were teenage parents.

During the 1980s, the at-risk literature focused on the self-reports of students and teacher observations (Carlson & Schaeffer, 1986; Fine, 1987). Several longitudinal studies have provided data by tracking at-risk youth from their schools to the streets (see Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack & Rock, 1987; Rumberber, 1983; and Wehlage, 1986). More recently, the culture within schools themselves has drawn attention (Byrk &Thum, 1989; Kronic & Hargis, 1990). Some

suggest that the schools themselves are at-risk and must be restructured in order to meet the needs of the students effectively (Hobbs, 1991; Howe & Kasten, 1992). Also, family and social issues that affect students lives, especially their academic performance, are being discussed indicating the responsibility of institutional prevention practices (Belcher, 1995). These studies are changing the "target" from a view of blaming the individual to looking at those who are at high risk in context of their environment at home and in school.

In the public eye, the image of the at-risk student is not favorable (Mills, Dunhan & Alpert, 1988). Regardless of urban or rural, the at-risk student who drops out of school before receiving a high school diploma is often perceived to be idle, unproductive, and a costly burden to society. Further, school withdrawal is often associated with crime and delinquency (Gruener, 1991; Mahoney, 1991). This negative image has been frequently reflected in research designed to find the determinant causal factors or predictive variables for at-risk within the students themselves. (Mills, et al, 1989)

Today, precise categories or topics for identification purposes of at-risk students vary considerably and few common definitions have emerged. However, as research has indicated, most often a "set of interrelated factors" have been operating for many years which move the student closer to the inevitable action of dropping out of school (Cohen & Garet, 1975; Farmer & Payne, 1992; Natriello, Pallas, & McDill, 1987) . While research on dropouts has recognized them as an historical problem, no clear definition has emerged (Cyril & Karr-Kidwell, 1993).

Purpose for Conducting the Inquiry

Two-thirds of all schools in the United States are in rural areas, and the majority of unserved and underserved children are located in rural America (Helge, 1989). Distances,

scattered populations, and inadequate services are obstacles to program development, particularly when highly trained personnel and specialized facilities and equipment are required (National Research Council, 1993). The isolation of many rural areas, especially those in remote locations with sparse populations, exacerbate many conditions which place youth at-risk.

Compounding these problems further is the powerful influence perceptions have on the values governing actions, philosophical leadership foundations, and educational practices toward at-risk (Craig & Norris, 1991). Leach (1977) proposed that personal interpretation of etiology are subject to one's conceptual frame of reference, usually composed of various pre-supposed standards of behavior. Therefore, if programs aimed toward at-risk students are not grounded in a clear and reasonable theory which guides practice, the likelihood is great that there will be a loss of focus and effectiveness (Prestine, 1993).

There are no published studies regarding the how rural school principals define at-risk and identify at-risk students. While many rural schools have initiatives to address at-risk students, many lack fidelity of "who comprised the at-risk populations and why that population is at-risk (Sagor, 1990, p. 65). The purpose of this study was to conduct an inquiry of the perceptions held by rural school principals about how they defined at-risk and how they, in turn, identify at-risk students and implement practices and policies to address the needs of these students.

Research Methodology

Theoretical Perspective

The lack of any consistent definition of at-risk in the literature led the researcher to employ survey and qualitative methodology (Fowler, 1988; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Heppner,

Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Ruben, 1983). Informing my research were tenets of social constructivism which suggest that language reveals individuals' knowledge, perceptions, and beliefs that provide a rational for acknowledging the credibility of individuals' oral and written discourse and its usefulness "...for assessing how individuals make judgements about people and events" (Goetz & LeCompte, p. 122). Qualitative methods are especially appropriate when researchers wish to provide "rich descriptive data about the contexts, activities, and beliefs of participants in educational settings" (Goetz & LeCompte, p. 17). In addition, LeCompte and Preissle (1992) suggest that norms, traditions, roles, and values are crucial contextual variables, and that beliefs, behavior, and learning are "socially constructed in the course of interaction with students, teachers, and others" (p. 818). Thus, a constructiveness, inquiry-oriented methodology grounded the theoretical foundation for this study.

Study Participants

The population of this study consisted of rural school principals in a rural northwestern state. The principals included in the study were currently employed in a rural school district. Sixteen percent were female and 70% were male (14%, no response). The largest group (48%) were between the ages 46 to 65, followed by 44% who fell between the ages of 36 to 45. On the whole, female principals were only slightly younger than their male counterparts. The mean for years of experience as a school principal was 7.74 years (SD = 6.92); however, the mode was 1 year as an administrator. The range of years of experience was from 1 year to 30 years.

Data Sources and Data Analysis

The data were gathered using a survey questionnaire, developed by the researcher. The surveys were mailed to the entire population of rural school principals (207) compiled from the

data base provided by the State's Department of Education. The total response to the mailed survey questionnaire was 152.

The survey consisted of 4 sections: (1) demographic information, (2) open-ended question asking respondents to define at-risk; (3) items requiring the respondent to rate on a 5 point Likert scale their agreement to characteristics of at-risk derived from the literature; (4) items to rank their current programs' effectiveness; open-ended questions to (5) gather information about current at-risk programs, (6) investigate respondents programming efforts (including current programs in use), and (7) to discover their perceptions of the kinds of programs and support they would like to have in their schools and communities.

The data were analyzed using the Statistical Analysis System (SAS) and logical analysis of content data. The demographic variables were summarized summary statistics. By virtue of their qualitative nature, the open-ended questions were analyzed using a pre-determined rule of analysis which followed the constant comparative methodology suggested by Glaser & Strauss, (1967) in order to identify and code similar themes and patterns with the aggregated data. In order to identify relationships on the portion of the survey containing the at-risk identifier scale, exploratory factor analysis was performed.

Major Themes Emerging from the Inquiry

The results of the study presented a particular perspective of at-risk students by rural school principals. Emergent themes defined at-risk youth as those who (a) experience negative home and family influences; (b) exhibit poor attitudes and behavior toward school; (c) engage in acting-out behaviors; and (d) express low concepts of self. The exploratory factor analysis on identifiers which related to at-risk students were composed of those students who are (Factor 1)

experiencing outside pressure to leave school, (Factor 2) isolated and not involved in the school's culture, and (Factor 3) not successful in the school environment due to academic failure.

The policies and programs were described as moderately effective (Mean, 2.76; SD, 1.43) on a scale from 1 to 5. However, responses to how principals measured "effective" at-risk programs outcomes in their schools failed to indicate any "best." Their responses did not discriminate among the effectiveness variables.

By far the majority of programs in practice for at-risk students (43%) provided academic remediation as their major emphasis. The second most frequently appearing theme was "professional/paraprofessional staff working with at-risk students." This content category represented 17.4% of the themes generated.

The two most frequently occurring themes offered by rural school principals for future at-risk needs were (a) changes to the traditional structure of schools and the school "culture" (28.7%) and improved parenting in families of at-risk students (16.6%).

Examination of the Themes

Findings. The most critical finding drawn from this study concerns the incongruence in how rural school principals define and identify at-risk versus the programs in place in schools to address the needs of rural at-risk students. While results of the content analysis on definitions indicate that principals perceive that family and environmental factors are a more important at-risk identifier than academic problems, most programs focused on academic remediation and drug and alcohol education.

In defining at-risk, more emphasis was placed on variables outside the control of schools and the school environment. For example, principals conceptualized at-risk as a failure of families to prepare students for school. The principals implied criticism of parenting skills and responsibility (i.e., "sending their kids to school not ready to learn). Rural school principals indicated the importance of parenting skills in the families of at-risk students. Also, it may suggest that while school principals express this perception, their lack of understanding of the often subtle complexities inherent in youth at-risk may be partly responsible for a lack of policies and programs that address the family system.

In addition, the factor explaining more than one-fourth of the variance in the identifiers of at-risk are students who view school as not important but who are not failing academically. Such a finding may suggest that identifying disengaged youth is a priority in defining who is at-risk or potentially at-risk. Academic failure and substance abuse, while constituting the largest number of at-risk programs in schools, explained on 6.1% of the variance in the factor analysis. Therefore, while these identifiers are perceived by principals as less important than others, the majority of policies and programs targeted toward those students identified with academic and substance abuse problems.

Another important finding was the perception held by rural school principals that schools needed to incorporate change. Generally speaking, these changes include such intangible criteria as "attributes of teachers" need changing, the "traditional structure of schools" demands a second look, and "school culture" is in need of change. While recognition that existing attributes of teachers, traditional structure and culture of schools is needed, there was a significant lack of any suggested direction how this change could be effected.

Results of the measurements of program effectiveness indicators indicated little discriminating power among them. On one hand, it is difficult to discriminate effectiveness if no clear definitions of at-risk exist. On the other hand, the quality of the programming and policies must have predetermined outcomes and measures of effectiveness.

Implications of Findings

Several implications emerged from these findings. Rural school principals expressed concern with the effect of society and environment upon today's youth. While some principals opted for a "blame the victim" stance toward at-risk, most of them indicated an awareness of school, home, and family influences. This is a significant change of "attitude" from the era of the 70s. Considering that most of the principals were educated during the late 60s and 70s, their experiences in schools perhaps have broadened their perspective of the etiology of at-riskness. Greater parental and community involvement in the schools, increased inclusion of families in the school culture could lead to higher standards of quality in programs and increased levels of comprehensive services to the students.

Distinct at-risk groups with different needs were perceived by rural school principals which indicated (a) a need for changes in how at-risk youth are defined, identified, and (b) changes needed in school policy and practices. Indications that both the context of social setting and the structure of the school contributes to the problem of at-risk has become clear in this study.

In many rural areas the concept of at-risk may be an enigma or source of contention among many community and school leaders (Berry, 1992). Perhaps this explains the limited range of available services for rural at-risk. The researcher suggests that engaging the

community as an active participant in the school culture may provide the needed support for non-traditional approaches to problem-solving.

Conclusions

Even thought literature reports that effective programs for rural at-risk youth incorporates a philosophy of collaboration between schools, social and health services agencies, and local law enforcement, the reluctance to interfere exists in rural communities. In this study, principals appear to have ample opportunity to get to know students on a personal level and considerable time to reflect about each student's academic, emotional and physical needs. However, given the social dynamics unique to many rural communities, the delay or lack of intervention with at-risk interventions which are individualized to students' needs may be explained by the reluctance of school principals to "get in the business" of families who are their neighbors, friends, and colleagues.

Conducting the inquiry has provided information that supports previous research which states the importance of expanding the school's involvement in the community and involving the "village to raise the child." Consequently, the findings from this inquiry further impress upon us that it is imperative for school counselors to be aware of rural school principals' perceptions and conventions so that we can influence change.

Finally, a conclusion supported by this research and others is that we need to refashion our school counseling programs. We need to include activities such as action research projects and active dialogue that can assist rural communities, schools, and families come to understand how the belief systems in rural schools and communities impact the academic, socio-psychological, and economic future of students.

If school counselors and rural school principals are aware of the special dynamics inherent in rural community schools, programs and policy changes could very well insure that rural school principals could bridge the gap between the stereotypically held perception of at-risk and lay a foundation that would encourage the development of a more realistic view of at-risk students, as well as an increased awareness of the reluctance or resistance of schools to reach out into the families and homes of students to effect change. This change in leadership can only be preceded by a change in the guiding philosophy and perception of at-risk students. When those in charge of policy- and decision-making are aware of each student's unique needs, the knowledge and commitment becomes viable for effective leadership in at-risk prevention and intervention programs.

School counselors are the front line of intervention and prevention in schools. Blaming the students, the parents, schools, and/or society will not provide solutions. Accepting that we must begin by becoming change agents and influencing, in positive ways, the perceptions held by those in positions to make decisions which effect the practices and policies of schools is imperative. Evaluation of existing programs, keeping our "ear to the ground" in order to be proactive in practice not reactive in policy is imperative. Unrealistic expectations and idealized conceptions about at-risk youth cannot guide effective practice. Consequently, it is imperative for us to monitor the perceptions and concerns in rural schools to that we can offer appropriate intervention if necessary.

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